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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EX-GUERRILLA AND PARAMILITARY DESCRIBE THEIR LIVES AS TERRORISTS

REF: BOGOTA 5616

Summary

1. (U) Colombia's Ministry of Defense (MOD), the agency in charge of the first phase of the individual desertion program for guerrillas and paramilitaries, began recording deserter testimonies on June 24 and invited Emboffs to observe. The MOD interviewed a former paramilitary and former ELN bloc commander. Ex-paramilitary "David" described his group's clashes with guerrillas over drug trafficking and his decision to desert because of poor pay. "Eduard," the ex-ELN member who deserted with 29 members of his front, admitted he had lost faith in the purpose of an armed revolution and that the ELN had suffered heavy losses. Both deserters said they wanted to return to civilian life and expressed satisfaction with the MOD's phase of the reinsertion program. End summary.

Paramilitary Group Underpaid

2. (SBU) On June 24, the MOD's camera crew did the first interview with "David," (no real name given,) a former Self Defense Forces of Casanare (ACC) member at the military-owned Tequendama Hotel in Bogota. David said he was recruited by the paramilitary group because he had lived in an area where the ACC patrolled. He joined at age 14 and deserted at 18. When asked about his unit's activities, he responded that they operated in Boyaca on the border with Meta Department. David commented that the ACC was losing the war, especially in logistics and finances. He claimed that the ACC clashed with guerrilla groups and other paramilitaries in the area, almost always over drugs. He described the armed conflict as "all about drugs."

3. (SBU) Although David joined the ACC as a regular fighter, he was soon trained and named as a squadron commander. He did not indicate that being a commander at his age was unusual. The ACC promised him a salary of 500,000 pesos per month (USD 220) but then paid him less and refused to grant him leave. He told interviewers that he had discovered the GOC's reinsertion program by finding pamphlets dropped into the area where he was operating. He deserted primarily because he never saw his family and felt betrayed by the ACC's failure to pay him his promised salary. He shrugged off the question on how he felt about participating in illegal activities. He told interviewers that he hoped to return to school and finish his basic education.

ELN Revolution Rings Hollow

4. (SBU) Once David left the room, MOD officials began the second interview with former National Liberation Army (ELN) Commander Ramiro Alberto Ruiz, ("Eduard") who coordinated the first ELN mass desertion (reftel) after twenty years with the group. According to Eduard, most youth in his neighborhood joined the ELN in the mid-80s because there was little else to do. After, he attended the ELN's combat school. By his account, he was a regular fighter until 1993, when he traveled to Cauca Department with 20 others to form part of a new ELN Front.

5. (SBU) Eduard noted that the ELN had suffered losses in ongoing clashes with the FARC. He commented that he had lost many of his colleagues between 1999 and 2001 in the Ituango and Peca municipalities, Antioquia Department. During that high-conflict time, several ELN members left ELN ranks and returned home or joined the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). He stressed that the violence fed his disenchantment with the ELN, which ultimately led to his desertion. By 2002, his ELN front had been reduced to only 17 men, so the ELN Central Command (COCE) merged them with another band and renamed the fighters the "Heroes of Anori," after a historically significant battle and an ELN policy conference in 1983. The Heroes were based in northeastern Antioquia Department.

6. (SBU) Eduard stated that he left the ELN to return to his

family and because he stopped believing that a revolution would be successful. He said many ELN troops did not understand the supposed ideology of the conflict and the ELN has become plagued by widespread inequality. He noted that his bloc, like the rest of the ELN, was in a dormant phase and pitted against heavy GOC and FARC military forces. In contrast to David's testimony that focused on his individual situation, Eduard recounted that he had looked at other revolutions throughout history and decided they were only successful if the guerrillas caught governments off-guard. He noted that the ELN had started out as a popular group but had lost steam by 1990 to 1991 and had no chance of surprising the government. He also cited various Latin American revolutions that had failed and asserted that revolution in Colombia would not be viable. Furthermore, he admitted that he wanted to live with his children and common-law wife, Nadia, rather than miss out on his children's upbringing.

17. (SBU) He deserted in late May by feigning illness and traveling to Medellin for several days. On May 19, he arrived at his family's house and discussed it with his father and Nadia, who had herself been in the ELN for nine years until she left to raise their family. Although his father was reportedly concerned about possible Armed Forces mistreatment of demobilizing guerrillas, Eduard went to the demobilization center in Medellin on May 24 and surrendered. Once there, Defense officials told him that he could return to the ELN camp for three days and bring back as many of his front as possible for demobilization. He told his fellow fighters that they had no hope of winning and would not suffer if they surrendered. Twenty-nine fighters joined him, including his second-in-command.

Deserters Prepare to Return Home

18. (SBU) Both David and Eduard said the Defense Ministry's reinsertion program had fulfilled its promises. They added that they had not suffered any mistreatment by the military, as had been predicted by both of their illegal armed groups. During the first phase of individual reinsertion, deserters are offered housing by the Ministry of Defense, given basic humanitarian assistance, and debriefed for intelligence purposes. Deserters subsequently move to the Ministry of Interior and Justice's reinsertion program, where they are also provided housing, humanitarian assistance, and are enrolled in training and/or employment projects. Since Uribe took office there have been over 7,000 desertions, roughly 50 percent of those from the FARC.

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